

*Removing Body from  
Grave (Viet Nam, 1946)*  
by Wayne D. Larabee.



U.S. Army Center of Military History

# Recovering and Accounting for Prisoners of War and Missing Personnel

By THOMAS E. ERSTFELD

**T**he United States expends great effort to account for members of the Armed Forces who were lost while serving the Nation. Over the years no other country has done as much. The Department of Defense is responsible for personnel recovery and accounting. Today, the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) develops and oversees national policies which facilitate this overall endeavor.

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## Looking for the Lost

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, various commissions pursued information on the fate of missing servicemembers. In 1991 the Senate established the Select Committee on Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) Affairs, which thoroughly investigated the issue, including government attempts to resolve it. One committee recommended a single DOD office to oversee all matters relating to captive and missing Americans.

DPMO was initially organized as the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Office by DOD Directive 5110.10 on July 16, 1993, under the

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authority, direction, and control of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. This achieved centralized management of POW/MIA affairs within DOD. DPMO provides departmental participation in negotiations with foreign governments to achieve maximum accounting of missing servicemembers; assembles and analyzes information and maintains data

**the intent was to create one office to exercise policy, control, and oversight of the entire process**

bases on military and civilian personnel who are, or were, prisoners of war or missing in action; declassifies documents for disclosure and release according to public law and executive orders; and maintains channels of communication among Pentagon officials, members of Congress, POW/MIA families, and veterans organizations.

As the Deputy Secretary of Defense stated in a memorandum dated September 14, 1994, "The preservation of life and well-being of U.S. servicemembers and DOD civilians placed in harm's way while defending U.S. national interests is and must remain one of the department's highest priorities." He recognized that in an environment of military operations other than war, diminishing capabilities, and concurrent U.S. commitments, reliance on ad hoc recovery of personnel was unacceptable. Legislation enacted with the FY96 National Defense Authorization Act called for a single office within the Office of the Secretary of Defense with responsibility for missing persons policy. The intent was to merge past, present, and future accounting efforts with policy oversight for

live personnel recovery matters, thereby creating one office to exercise policy, control, and oversight of the entire process for investigation and recovery (including matters related to search, evasion, rescue, and escape), coordinate with other departments and agencies on all matters concerning missing persons, and establish procedures for DOD boards of inquiry and officials reviewing reports by such boards under the provisions of the Missing Persons Act of 1996.

The Under Secretary of Defense for Policy redesignated the Defense POW/MIA Office as the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office on August 15, 1996. This marked the first time since passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act that there was a single office responsible for not only the historical accounting mission, but for policy, control, and oversight of the whole process—from the time of loss, through search and rescue, to either recovery of an individual or of remains or a conclusive determination of fate. It set the stage for this office to provide consistent leadership for the POW/MIA issue and fostered unified commitment to retrieving isolated personnel before they become unaccounted for. DPMO uses a threefold approach to shape recovery and accounting policies: preparing forces before combat, recouping isolated Americans before or after capture, and retrieving and identifying the remains of those killed in action.

In addition, DPMO provides overall development, coordination, approval, and promulgation of policies and plans for enemy POWs. In this regard, it works closely with the Army, which is the executive agent for administering the enemy POW program and is thus responsible for the day-to-day care, custody, and control of captives.

The top priority is live recovery. DPMO has established policies and guidance for the services and combatant commands that ensure that their warriors are appropriately trained, since preparation increases the odds of surviving captivity. The odds grow further when cutting edge technology can facilitate evasion, survival, and recovery. The office is a strong advocate for the development of such capabilities, especially those which locate isolated personnel. The recovery mission has increased the interaction between DPMO and other offices and headquarters across DOD in a continuing effort to coordinate policy and advances recovery issues. The office's operational partners are the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency, an element of U.S. Joint Forces Command which is the executive agent for administering the recovery program, and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), which runs the intelligence community POW/MIA analytical cell for ongoing missions.

U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii.



Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office



Honor guard at  
Hickham Air Force  
Base, Hawaii.



U.S. Navy (Gloria J. Barry)

### Team Members

DPMO also works with other DOD organizations to carry out the accounting mission. This effort brings together many specialties and provides the majority of the field work associated with the accounting mission and includes:

*Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA).* An activity of U.S. Pacific Command, JTF-FA sends search teams to conduct analyses, investigations, archival research, and recovery in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to resolve Vietnam War cases.

*U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii (CILHI).* The lab has the worldwide mission of searching for, recovering, and identifying remains of Americans who died serving the Nation. It also supports civil humanitarian missions and provides technical assistance.

*Armed Forces Repository of Specimen Samples for the Identification of Remains.* The repository performs DNA testing to identify remains from all conflicts and supports groups outside DOD when tasked.

*U.S. Air Force Life Science Equipment Laboratory.* This organization conducts scientific evaluations of aircraft and equipment at crash sites to help determine whether there were any survivors.

*Service casualty offices.* These elements act as primary liaison between families and all other government groups involved in POW/MIA accounting. The service secretaries maintain offices as the focal point on casualty matters while the Department of State handles missing civilians.

*Defense Intelligence Agency.* The agency maintains a program dedicated solely to Vietnam War accounting known as Stony Beach. A team of experts supports JTF-FA and DPMO by conducting interviews in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and the United States. DIA investigates last known alive cases and first-hand live sighting reports. Their work also contributes to the DPMO oral history program.

DPMO and its partners form a unified, cohesive team of 500 military and civilian members with an annual budget of more than \$100 million.

### Identification

Personnel accounting is defined as actions taken to gather and assess evidence on missing servicemembers. Although many regard these as

solely cases requiring long-term work, they do not rule out the live recovery option. If the United States locates what is believed to be one of its missing, all policy and operational resources are utilized to bring that person home quickly.

DPMD relies on four broad activities to account for POWs and missing personnel: investigation, recovery, identification, and notification. Together they ensure timely and comprehensive storage of facts, tasking of agencies to acquire new evidence, and maintenance of current case files that enable analysts and research specialists to determine an optimal approach. The following reflects the steps of case resolution.

First, DPMO conducts lengthy negotiations, which are pivotal to a team's ability to conduct joint investigations with host-country support. These investigations include interviewing witnesses (oral history), searching files for documents related to a loss incident (archival research), and unilateral investigations in which foreign nations conduct their own research and share their findings with the United States.

If an analytical team determines that an individual has perished, a remains recovery is launched to excavate, identify, and return the remains to the family for disposition. To initiate a recovery, a team must demonstrate that an American loss occurred at a particular site. Second, it determines whether the remains are likely to be present. Third, it negotiates access. Finally, it reviews safety requirements, weather conditions, and availability of recovery teams. Based on these factors, the DPMO team proceeds with excavation at the designated site.

Americans and host-country laborers work one site at a time, although many excavations can be conducted concurrently. A board-certified anthropologist leads each U.S.-led joint effort. The teams excavate dozens of sites a year and, despite new technology, such efforts are time-consuming and labor-intensive. Sites often must be revisited over a number of years. The CILHI anthropologist ensures the scientific integrity of the work, while teams catalogue and transport their findings to forensic scientists in Hawaii.

Expert scientists work in special facilities to identify remains. With common forensic techniques they gain clues by reviewing official records that include military and eyewitness reports along with wreckage and personal items from the sites. The most valuable evidence, however, comes from comparing skeletal and dental remains to the records of missing individuals. Some cases require DNA typing.

Once officials approve the identity, representatives of the appropriate service and scientific community visit the family to explain their findings. Then the service helps plan interment.

An additional benefit of the archival research preceding a recovery lies in the synthesis of additional databases. Research by DPMO archivists led to the creation of a database of unaccounted Americans from the Korean War. This document, *Personnel Missing—Korea*, serves as a baseline in accounting for individuals not covered by the postwar repatriation. Available at <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo>, the document helps the services renew contact with thousands of families. A long-established database for the Vietnam War, *Personnel Missing—Southeast Asia*, and a new database, *Personnel Missing—Cold War*, are also on the DPMO Web site.

Another project recently developed by DPMO researchers is the Korean War Aircraft Loss Database, which contains some 3,400 Navy, Marine, and Air Force aircraft losses. It also includes aircraft type and tail number, date of loss, circumstances, status of crew, crash location, and the blood chit number, if available, and will be a significant tool for analysts, historians, researchers, and academics in the future.

## World War II and Korea

More than 88,000 Americans remain unaccounted for from World War II, Korea, Southeast Asia, and the Cold War. Over 78,000 are from World War II, with most buried as unknowns in cemeteries throughout Europe or lost at sea. In general, when local people discover evidence of remains from World War II, CILHI sends a team to investigate and prepare for excavation. Former enemies sometimes help. In August 2000, a joint U.S.-Russian team located the crash site of a Navy PV-1 reported missing from a bombing mission on the Kamchatka Peninsula. DPMO and CILHI returned a year later and recovered some remains. Because the harsh climate restricts archeological activity, the next excavation cannot be mounted in the area until summer 2002.

Operations continue in Tunisia, Panama, Papua New Guinea, central Europe, southern China, and elsewhere. DPMO and CILHI worked with the Chinese government from 1997 through 1999 to recover the remains of ten Americans from a B-24 crash site in the ravines of Guangxi Province. Investigation of two sites in Tibet began last summer. In November 2000, CILHI identified remains of 19 marines killed on Butaritari Island in the Makin Atoll, including Sergeant Clyde Thomason, the first enlisted marine awarded the Medal of Honor during World War II.

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1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Jim Vanhegy)

Remains of soldier killed in Korea.

More than 8,100 Americans from the Korean War are still unaccounted for, most of whom were lost in the North. DPMO has negotiated on an annual basis with Pyongyang since 1996 to conduct joint recovery operations (JROs) in an isolated nation with which the United States is technically still at war. Excavation teams recovered 152 sets of remains during 27 JROs through 2001. Ten have been identified.

DPMO was one of the few U.S. Government organizations actively engaged with North Korea until recently. In negotiations held in December 2000 between DPMO and North Korean officials, an agreement was reached to schedule ten JROs in 2001, and to double the number of operations and expand the size of teams, increase the length of activities, and add areas of operations.

All recovery through 2000 was conducted in an area sixty miles north of Pyongyang, but DPMO has tried for years to gain access to other locales of known losses. The schedule for 2001 permitted searching near the Chosin Reservoir for the first time. As the site of some of the most savage fighting during the war, the area may conceal the remains of more than a thousand servicemembers. The United States is aggressively seeking access to several POW camp sites along the Yalu River, but North Korea has not agreed to admit JROs in these areas.

One disappointment in accounting for the missing from the Korean War involves an inability to use DNA identification for more than 850 unknowns buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. When returned fifty years ago, they were treated with a preservative which has prevented retrieval of DNA samples. Six sets of remains, four from the Korean War and two from World War II, have been exhumed, and all show signs of treatment with this preservative. DPMO is supporting research to find means to extract DNA to permit analysis.

### Vietnam and Elsewhere

Some 2,500 Americans remained unaccounted for when U.S. troops withdrew from Southeast Asia in 1973. Today that number stands at 1,948. The remains of more than 600 individuals have been repatriated, identified, and returned to families since 1973.

There have been 65 joint field activities (JFAs) in Vietnam as well as 72 in Laos since 1988 and 19 in Cambodia since 1992. Some were conducted in prior years but not under formal agreements. With JTF-FA, DPMO regularly negotiates with these countries. Cooperation with Vietnam and Cambodia is excellent and is improving with Laos. At consultative talks in September 2000 in Vientiane, the Laotian government agreed to increase the number of U.S. members on JFAs from 40 to 50, which Washington has long requested. They will also permit excavations based on chances for success rather than on a strict geographical basis and allow operations to run past time limits if anthropologists recommend it.

One priority of Vietnam War accounting concerns last known alive cases—Americans believed to have survived their initial loss incident. The outcome of these investigations helps resolve the question of captives left behind in Indochina. The United States originally identified 296 of these cases throughout Southeast Asia. Intensive investigations have shown that 181 individuals are deceased, and the remains of 52 have been located, repatriated, and identified.

About 120 Americans are unaccounted for from the Cold War, most of whom were lost on the peripheral territory of the former Soviet Union (FSU). DPMO engages with Russia through the United States-Russia Joint Commission. The objective of this body is determining whether servicemembers are being held in FSU facilities and, if so, securing their release and repatriation, locating and returning the remains of any servicemembers interred, and ascertaining facts regarding unresolved cases. While evidence has emerged that Americans are being held, investigations continue.





Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office

President Clinton  
outside Hanoi,  
November 2000.

The commission is organized into four working groups representing World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. The Cold War group focuses on American aircraft losses as well as Soviet military personnel lost in Korea, Afghanistan, and other areas. The commission meets in plenary session at least once a year. DPMO also negotiates with the Chinese concerning the resolution of Cold War cases.

### Prisoners of War

An outstanding issue that continues to surface from both the Korean and Vietnam Wars concerns reports of Americans still held captive. In the case of North Korea, because of publicity surrounding relatively new American activities in that country, additional reports have now surfaced—some repeating earlier claims. The U.S. Government uses all available resources to investigate such reports.

However, it has yet to substantiate any information regarding alleged sightings of live POWs. Analysts have connected many of the reports to six defectors living in North Korea since the 1960s—four of whom are believed to be alive. More than a thousand persons who left North Korea have been debriefed since 1994. Two dozen claimed some knowledge of POWs in North Korea, but further questioning discredited their claims. Others refer to the defectors. DPMO has a process in place to ask North Korean officials about prisoners. Moreover, it continually seeks to interview the defectors, but these requests have been denied.

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In the case of Indochina, most live sighting reports originate from former residents of Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. Analysts rigorously scrutinize each eyewitness account of an American in those nations. Evaluations include historical information covering more than three decades. Many reports correlate to returned POWs or other Westerners known to analysts. Investigation plans are developed for others. Specialists often re-interview the original source and others to obtain clarifying details. They also examine imagery and other data. Some reports require an on-scene investigation. Vietnam agreed in 1991 to let U.S. officials conduct live sighting investigations. During such efforts, the DIA Stony Beach team goes to Southeast Asia and researches sightings on short notice. In recent years, the United States has pursued a hundred sightings in Vietnam with little warning and twenty in Laos and Cambodia. Once work on a first-hand live sighting is completed, analysts present the findings for review to senior intelligence experts, who ensure that analysts and investigators have pursued every avenue. No investigation of live sightings has proven as yet that American POWs were left behind in Indochina.

The United States has acquired 21,794 reports pertaining to Americans in Southeast Asia since Saigon fell in 1975: 1,914 first-hand live sightings, 4,858 hearsay sightings, 5,262 reports of crash/grave sites, and 9,760 submissions of dogtags—the manufacturing of which is a cottage industry. Of the first-hand reports, 1,897 have been resolved. Of those, 1,321 were attributed to Americans who are accounted for such as POW returnees, missionaries, civilians jailed for violating Vietnamese laws, and U.S. investigators; 45 were correlated to wartime sightings of military personnel or pre-1975 sightings of civilians who remain unaccounted for; and 531 were determined to be fabrications. The remaining 17 unresolved first-hand reports represent the focus of analytical and collection efforts. Of these, 16 pertain to Americans reported in a captive environment and the other to an American in a noncaptive environment. Sixteen pertain to sightings prior to 1976 and the other reported sighting was in the 1976–80 time period.

### Full Engagement

An integral part of investigating live-sighting reports is a project of the DPMO joint commission support directorate. Having received numerous reports alleging the presence of American servicemembers in Soviet prison camps, researchers have established an investigative program to correlate those reports with oral and written information from worldwide sources. Initiatives to date have allowed the office to build cooperative

relationships with academic specialists, government officials, and former inmates of Soviet prisons and the gulag. As information is acquired, it is examined against an expanding database, with key items published on the DPMO Web site. While most reports focus on World War II and the Korean conflict, sightings from the latter part of the Soviet era are also considered.

In 1994, DPMO initiated efforts by the Defense Science Board to develop quality standards for use of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) in identification because it is shared by maternal relatives.

**“fullest possible accounting”  
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can be ultimately resolved**

Nearly 45 percent of all identifications utilize mtDNA, but forensic scientists need samples from a relative to make a comparison with remains.

DPMO conducts an active outreach program to contact families for sampling. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for POW/Missing Personnel Affairs has addressed this issue with virtually all the leaders of veterans organizations, senior enlisted members of the Armed Forces, state directors of veterans affairs, and service secretaries.

In 1996, DPMO developed a realistic procedure to account for missing individuals when live or mortal remains repatriation is not possible. It outlines when to terminate active recovery efforts, as in cases where it is judged that no government action will recover remains (such as those who

by private citizens to excavation sites, underwater recovery, disposition of artifacts, release of Socialist Republic of Vietnam archival photos, family access to case files and POW/MIA information, compensation for return of remains, and blood chits.

A final aspect of the DPMO mission concerns its role as a center of expertise in Southeast and Northeast Asian affairs. Its negotiations and JTF-FA field activities have built trust and cooperation between the United States and Vietnam, which helped make President Clinton’s visit to that country possible in November 2000. DPMO was engaged in the preliminary planning and assisted the White House staff on all Presidential activities in Hanoi.

DPMO determined which recovery site the President would visit and arranged for the sons of the crash victim to accompany him. It also ensured his participation in the scheduled repatriation of the remains of three missing Americans, thus making the ceremony timely. The trip symbolized normalization, crystallized issues for future discussion, and defined new terms of reference for POW/MIA matters. The office assumed similar duties for the visits by the Secretary of Defense to Vietnam in March 2000 and the Secretary of State to North Korea in October 2000.

The Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office has a brief but significant history and a national mandate to execute a vital mission. The accomplishments of the entire DOD team, which is seeking the fullest possible accounting of missing American servicemembers, are remarkable. True to its motto, DPMO is *keeping the promise*. **JFQ**



Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office

Excavation site in  
Southeast Asia.

have perished at sea). In the final analysis, however, “fullest possible accounting” implies that not every case can be ultimately resolved.

DPMO wrote the directives and instructions for all aspects of the personnel recovery mission. It also implemented the Missing Persons Act of 1996. In addition to these seminal documents, it developed government policies on recovery and identification, disinterment for identification, recovery of non-DOD personnel and remains, visits